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LIVING WITH THE XEP80

a Subjective Review by Wally Wong,
BRACE

Retyped for STATUS by Gene Rodriguez

Yes, folks, it's finally here, the long awaited 80 column adaptor from Atari, the XEP80. Actually, it's more than an 80-column display module, it's also a parallel printer interface, (due to deadlines, I did not have a chance to investigate the printer aspects of the XEP80 but will tell what the claims are). There are some delights and some plights you should be aware of as well as a plethora of potential programming hacking that could keep some Atari enthusiast awake many a nights.

The Atari XEP80 Interface Module is an 80-column video display controller and "standard" parallel printer interface for all 8-bit computers with a minimum of 16K RAM. The XEP80 looks just like the Atari SX212 modem, same size, dimension and color - minus the lights on the front panel. The XEP80 comes with just about everything you need: video cable to connect the module to a composite monitor (monochrome recommended), power supply adaptor (Egads! Another one, that makes six!), the module, a 28 page owner's manual, a warranty card (that no one I know sends in), and a 5 1/4" distribution disk, all for \$79.99, list.

A nice long cable runs out the rear of the module that connects to

your computer via joystick port one or two. Most will probably elect to use port two and keep the other available for a joystick. No problem except one of the demo programs (WINDOW.BAS) will only work if the joystick is in port two and the module plugged into one. The power switch is located on the rear and a tiny diagonal window emits a subtle green light on the front panel when the power is on. The video cable is a simple cable with RCA male jacks on both ends. One end connects to the rear of the module and the other to your composite monitor.

The "standard" parallel printer port is a DB25 parallel female connector found on the STs and IBM type systems; not centronics, and not a Atari 850 or P/R Connection connector. This is one of the reasons why I haven't tried the printer aspect of the module; no cable and not being able to use my 850 parallel cable. The reason for using DB25 connection is for "standardization" which means you can obtain a printer cable from just about any computer store, and not be hand-cuffed to "Atari Only" vendors who would be the only ones carrying 850/PRC parallel cables (but we will make our purchase at our local Atari vendor, right??). If you wish to use the parallel printer port solely as a printer port, hold down the shift key while booting the disk and continue to hold until its completed loading. This will allow output to the printer although you'll be in 40 columns through the computer video port or RF. Here is what the owner's manual says

about selecting the printer port:

"When you start up your system with the XEP80 Module, the module is prepared to direct output to a printer through the parallel port(P1:). Specifying P2: directs output to the ATARI 850 Interface Module; P3: outputs to the 1025 Printer; P4: to the 1020 Color Plotter; P5: to the 1027 Printer; P6: to the 1029 Printer; P7: to the XMM801 Printer; and P8: to the XDM121 Printer."

There is a "PRINTER.BAS" program on the distribution disk. I haven't looked at it, it may have something to do with configuration and the XEP80. The XEP80 also sports an internal 2K buffer for printing, nice touch! (Nicer if its easily expandable, that's too much to ask of Atari.) That's all I can say about the XEP80 as a printer interface.

Turn on the XEP80, monitor, disk drive(s), insert the XEP80 disk (of course you made a copy of the original, right?) and turn on the computer. The XEP80 handler comes as an AUTORUN.SYS file so it will boot up automatically. If your monitor is adjusted to give you a full screen with a normal 40 column screen (like mine), the first thing you will notice is the bottom half of the last three characters of the "READY" prompt of BASIC in the upper left hand corner of the screen. If you type "DOS" to get to the DOS menu (DOS 2.5 comes on the disk), the first line of the heading is tucked somewhere beneath the top of your monitor chassis. The

next thing you will notice is the bunch of tiny characters (relative to 40 column characters) on the screen! Folks, you now have an 80 column display. The characters are quite readable on the BMC and Commodore 1702 composite color monitors. The display looks !Great! on a monochrome composite monitor (once I got mine to work properly).

The characters are defined within a 7x10 cell (7 wide x 10 high) compared to the 8x8 cell used normally. I think this is the reason for the truncated display at the top of the screen; the characters are taller than normal and pushing the top of the display. Now this is just a guess, I'm no video display wiz. This can be corrected by adjusting the vertical width. Correcting for 80-columns will create a smaller vertical screen when you return to 40 columns. This is okay if the vertical adjustment is located on the front of the monitor or easily accessible, if not, you'll have to decide if you want to make this adjustment and then find someone qualified to do it.

The XEP80 can actually display up to 256 character columns but only 80 are available at a time (Hmm, doesn't AtariWriter Plus scroll in 256 columns??!). The demo program "WINDOW.BAS" and a joystick illustrates this aspect nicely. Remember, the module has to be plugged into port one and the joystick in two for the program to work. If you want to disable the XEP80 but want to use the printer port,

hold down the shift key when booting the system. This disables the 80-column and enables the normal video output; composite video port or RF. The XEP80 handler disables the ANTIC chip from displaying and display I/O is directed to the XEP80. There is a document file on the distribution disk that explains all this in detail.

The distribution disk comes with DOS 2.5, the XEP80 driver, assorted demo programs written in BASIC, assembly language source code, and a doc file that goes into the hardware and software specifics in detail.

The following are some thrills and chills I've experienced during the course of a week since I bought the XEP80. Remember, these are only preliminary experiences and are not conclusive, especially the items listed in "CHILLS". I qualify that because the XEP80 handler is relocatable and compatibility may just be finding the right spot for the handler.

THRILLS: (1)It is compatible with SpartaDos 3.2. The XEP80 handler (the AUTORUN.SYS file on the distribution disk) must be installed through the STARTUP.BAT. I renamed the AUTORUN.SYS file to XEP80.COM and when creating the STARTUP.BAT file, the XEP80 file should be the last item in the batch. I have not tried it with the Time/Date Display (TD) line since I rarely use it because of the conflicts with other programs. Note: If you happen to setup your ramdisk (RD.COM) after installing the handler, you'll get garbage on the

screen. I found that out by turning the XEP80 off and back on, the screen clears and behaves.

(2)ATARI BASIC - you still have a maximum of three lines per line number but now three lines equals 240 characters instead of 120. I would refrain from extending BASIC lines beyond 120 characters to maintain compatibility between the XEP80 and standard 40 column screen. SETCOLOR AND DRAWTO commands cannot be used.

(3)MAC/65, yes!

(4)The display is good on a color monitor and great on a monochrome. The doc file provides plenty of information to develop some great applications taking advantage of the XEP80. I've been looking at some PD/Shareware text editors written in BASIC that could easily be modified to use the XEP80. Remember to give credit to the author if you plan on using existing programs as a foundation for your programming. I'll leave it to your good programming morals to contact authors before you start hacking someones program and distributing them.

(5)The demo programs on the distribution disk are a great source for programming ideas and tips on how to use the many attributes of the XEP80.

CHILLS: (1)There are no programs available that uses the XEP80 except for the demo programs.

(2)AtariWriter 80, if I may call it that, will be a couple of months before it is released. November, maybe?? Contrary to some rumors that the AW80 was cancelled or shelved, the AW80 is being worked on, confirmed with Neil

Harris on GENIE.

(3)No ACTION! XEP80 does not like the way ACTION! behaves with the screen.

(4)No BASIC XE. Same reason as number (3). Probably the same with BASIX XL.

(5)I also found that with the system on, it may try to reboot when turning the XEP80 off and on with DOS 2.5, sometimes. Turning the XEP80 off and on like this is probably not good for your system, so make sure you process the SpartaDos batch files correctly to avoid this.

(6)Inconvenience between switching plugs connecting the monitor between the video cable coming out of my XE and the XEP80. You can't have both connected at the same. There are two solutions: a) run out and buy a monochrome composite monitor and connect the XEP80 into this monitor and keep the video connected to the color composite monitor (or vice versa if your present monitor is monochrome) or, b) build a switch box that will handle all the different connections. Plans for the switch box I built are simple and I'll submit it to PSAN...next month.

Neutral Notes: (1)be sure you try out the monitor with the XEP80 before you buy.

(2)Some monitors have a 40 or 80 column switch either inside or outside. This switch might have to be set to obtain a decent display (as suggested by Darryl, Atari Tech).

(3)If your monochrome monitor looks fine in 40 columns but you get flashes of indecipherable dots, try adjusting

the horizontal hold. Again, this adjustment might be internal so think before you jump.

(4)the XEP80 supports bit mapped graphics, 320x200.

(5)the XEP80 handler replaces the E:, S:, and P: vectors in the Handler Address Table.

Personal Touch: I believe this is the single product that will make or break the "only a game machine" mentality of the eight bit Ataris. If the applications software is done well and released in reasonable time and the advent of the new disk drive and maybe a drop in price, the Atari XE will be the most affordable, versatile and serious computer system on the market. Imagine the day when new computer buyers choose the Atari because it's AFFORDABLE and DOES THE JOB WELL!.... and it has great graphics and games. We know this already, now it's time for the public to find out.

RAMAHOLIC TWO

Bob Prince of STATUS

The Atari 8 bit computer has been a loyal friend in our household for four years plus. In addition to my college daughter's 800, we have an 800 and two 800XL's. Because of its superior display and all around ruggedness, the 800 is our game machine and the favorite of the youngsters. About a year ago, I installed a Rambo 256K memory upgrade in one of the XL's. Since my son is a senior getting ready for college and making all sorts of

noises about how he NEEDS a computer when he leaves, and since we both compete for the use of the upgraded XL, I decided the time had come to install another Rambo.

While I hardly consider myself an expert technician, I was not a bit intimidated by this mod. After all, I had already assembled an 850 interface kit, built a power supply for an XL, and done various modifications to drives, cables and computers. What could go wrong? So, I sent my wife to Interface (the store) for my birthday present -- a Rambo mod. It only cost about \$35.00, since I already had the memory chips from an old mod to my 800 that I'd removed a while ago.

Saturday came and I got up at 6:00 AM -- way ahead of the normal folks in my house. I went downstairs, cleared the kitchen table, set up my tools, spread aluminum foil out, connected a bare wire to it, the cold water pipe and my wrist strap, and proceeded with the operation. First remove the screws holding the case together, disconnect the keyboard, wiggle out the mother board, and carefully remove the metal shield. Check and double check the chip locations and which Antic chip I had. Select the jumper configuration for my computer... Bingo, just as I had hoped -- I had the easiest situation -- socketed chips and an Antic C021697. This was going to be a piece of cake!

The installation went smoothly, and as I was pressing home the last of my memory chips (with an IC tool so I

wouldn't bend those fragile pins) I said a little prayer of thanks for letting me finish before the rest of the house woke up. One final check to make sure all chips were oriented right and well seated and all jumpers correct, and connect it for the big test. A little prayer before throwing the switch, then ENERGIZE! That familiar soft buzz and the friendly "READY" prompt! OK!! Print FRE(0) and 37902! Now we're ready to check the extended RAM. All power off, hook up the drive, power on, pop in DOS 2.5 and boot. The DUP screen appears (after a while of course... this is ONE SLOW DOS). Hey wait a minute -- shouldn't I have seen something like "Setting up Atari 130 XE ramdisk?" Oh!Oh!

Disconnect it all and give it the once over. Try again. No luck. Check my other XL -- hope the DOS is bad. Rats! -- it's not. Wake up the teen age son -- hand him the instructions, a magnifying glass and a flashlight. Show him the computer and tell him to find the problem. (Note to other fathers: it's important to keep kids -- especially teens -- in the dark about your own ignorance, so when faced with circumstances like this, you must use some ingenuity. I told my son that this was a test; I of course KNEW what was wrong, but wanted to see how sharp he was. He looked at me strangely, probably 'cause he was still asleep! Half hour later I peeked in to see what my teenage hacker had found.

"Wake up, Bobby!!"

"Looks ok to me, Dad," he says.

Rats! Try to think...Oh, yeah, isn't this the same computer that J.C. Petty had tried to upgrade with his home made board last year? It didn't work then either. Hmm -- with all the components made in enough different countries to carry any vote in the UN General Assembly, it's probably something deep inside the computer that's interfering with the memory access. So I called a friend and asked to trade computers with him providing he had no plans to upgrade his. He didn't, so we traded.

Somewhat chastened by now, I started again. I was no longer complacent about this simple mod; so when I opened the shielding and found the chips all soldered I wasn't surprised. I also found I now had the old Antic chip. Oh well.....just a little more soldering. No sweat! Have you ever de-soldered eight 16 pin chips? That's 128 little balls of solder that must be sucked out of these little holes in the printed circuit board (pcb). If you don't get it all out the chips don't come free. I tried to be very careful at first, since I wanted to save the chips. I soon resorted to chopping them up so I could pull the pins one by one, as I melted the solder. We're talking big time mutilation here. Jason would be proud. I had those useless suckers out pronto.

Then I inspected my handiwork. Hmm, what are those little silver hairs curling up on the pcb? Awg!!! They're traces from the circuit! What have I done?!?! Oh well, I have plenty of wire and solder. I'll cut the story a

little short here and just mention a week's delay to get sockets and cool off.

The next Saturday I set out again to finish the mod. I jumped all the suspicious traces, soldered in the sockets and plugged in the rest of the chips and Rambo board. To be safe, I used some memory chips from a spare board I had for my old 800. Then, after saying a fervent prayer and crossing my fingers, I powered up. Silence and a blank screen. Take out the Rambo and try it again -- same thing. Screw a magnifying glass to my eye, shine light and scrutinize everything... Nothing. Little bright spots before my eyes. I turned the problem over to the teen without even a story about a test. No luck. Dead computer! RATS!!!

So, I called STATUS BBS and left a message for Dick Litchfield, our resident hardware guru. If anyone could find the problem, Dick could. I asked for an autopsy. Dick picked up my computer at the club meeting and said he'd give it a look, but I could tell from his expression that he wasn't optimistic.

Today Dick called and said he thought he'd found the problem...the chips weren't right. I said I'd tested them in my 800 and they were ok. His reply was like a light dawningHow could I test 64K chips in an 800?

Of course! It uses only 16K chips. Then the truth dawnedthe chips I used in the first computer may

have been 64K's, not 256's. I checked and read them out -- "MB8264" -- yep 64K. But where are the 256 chips? Still on the modified memory board for the 800. The implications of it all hit me like a ton of bricks. The first mod would have worked if I had ONLY used the right chips! What a KLUTZ!

Superbase-Personal

ST Software Review

Superbase Personal, is a relational database program for the Atari ST line of computers, written by Simon Tranter with GEM conversions by Brian White and is published by Precision Software Limited of Surrey, England. Its first edition became available in January of 1987 and is a relatively new program for the ST. The program was previously available for IBM PC users and other computers.

Since buying my 1040-ST in August of this year, I have been looking for the "ultimate" in database programs. Superbase comes close. Although I have not gone into the relational aspects of Superbase, I understand from reading the manual that sharing of information from one file to another is a simple task.

The program is supplied on one non-copy protected disk, consequently; archiving the original is easy and in my opinion, is a must. The manual's first ten pages go into great detail about the copy rights we as users have and how one can and should copy the

program disk for use with or without the sample tutorials. In addition, there is an extensive section of material on how to use the various "gadgets" in the GEM environment - sizing boxes, dragging displays, etc.

To date, I have used the program for a number of different applications. Inventory of Household goods, showing cost, vendor, manufacturer, model number, serial number, acquisition date, location of the particular item in the house, and every other piece of pertinent information I could think of at the time. A master copy of the list has been supplied to my Homeowners Insurance carrier as a complete inventory in case of some devastation. I used some of the mathematical functions available in a couple of files for handicapping sailboats in their races. One of the handicaps is based on "time on distance" the other is based on "time on time". These two files have proved themselves quite handy when particular results are needed in a hurry and have saved me many tedious calculations for which I have little propensity of doing. Those two files and a third related file will serve as future sources for mailings to past race participants for up-coming events as, not only was the boat and its handicap stored, the skipper's name, address, and phone number were also entered.

The program is GEM oriented and utilizes the mouse for almost all functions in the familiar "point and click" function. When first running the

program one is presented with the title page and a header which requests the user to "please open a file". When first designing a database file, the user is asked if access to that particular file should be restricted by the use of a password to gain access. So far I haven't felt the need to restrict my files like that, but have done it, just to see what happens. When asked for the password, if you put in something which is not correct, access is denied. Even though the word may be correct, if the case is different, it won't open the file. Once the file is designed and laid out, then data entry is straightforward. One has the choice of three different methods of display of the entered data: Table, Record, and Form. The Table option shows the data on a horizontal plane and if the line is longer than the standard 80 column display the table can be scrolled by using the slider bar on the bottom of the screen. The Record view is the one which I have used for data entry, although any of the three can be used. In this view, all the data is arranged in a vertical line, all on the same column. In the Form view, one has the ability to move the components of the particular file from place to place on the screen by pointing and dragging, so that various forms can be set up to satisfy anyone's desires.

At the bottom of the display are a series of "buttons" which resemble those commonly seen on VCR's: the double arrows for fast forward or rewind, a small square for stop/pause, a single arrow for next file or

previous file and a few others. One of these is the filter button. Through the filter button one can select a particular file to look over or a series of files. This is accomplished by indicating a filter that says something "like" so-and-so. An example of this would be "Zip Code LIKE 234*". The asterisk being a wild card and with that particular example in an address file you would get all of the entries whose zip code started with 234. The same could be done for names like "name LIKE *rob*" and here any name with ROB anywhere would be displayed. The "LIKE" is an operator and using it that way, the program searches without regard to upper/lower case. The filter is used in many other functions of the program, especially in reports which are generated.

At the top of the display screen are headers, the form is familiar; the commands there may not be, but in most cases will be obvious. One header which is not obvious is the one entitled "Process". It is through this command that Superbase shines. From here one generates the reports through the "Process - Query". Upon selecting this, one is presented with the "Query definition" screen. The first line allows one to have the date, title, and page number indicated on the top of each page. If the date had been preset using the Control Panel accessory, then the program will print out the current date in a form preset by the user. It can be Month/Day/Year or Day/Month/Year, depending upon the users choice. The Months can be spelled

out completely or abbreviated; or the entire date could be the computer-ease 00/00/87. Then one has the choice of which fields from his file he wants presented. In the case of my race results, I did not show the skippers address, phone number, or his boat color; or some of the calculations in the program like the conversion from hours minutes and seconds to all seconds; or the result of the distance times his handicap. The next line is the report line, wherein one can sum various numerical fields, group various fields, or have the program provide a count of files. For example, if you were using Superbase as a budget medium and you had input all amounts spent for various categories; you could group the expenses under, say, groceries, count the number of times you spent money at the grocery store and then get a final total for all money spent. The next selection in the Query definition screen is the Filter line, from which one can have only certain files shown on the report. Back to the case of the handicapping, I put in several races on the same file, but gave each a unique Race ID, which was one of my fields. When I came to printing the results for a particular race, I put the filter in which said "RACE ID 'LIKE' INDSUM 3". (Indsum 3 was our Indian Summer Regatta, Race number 3). Through that I only got those participants in that particular race. The next (and last) line in the Query is the "Order" line. It is this one in which one decides how or in what order the data should be presented on the report. Back to my handicapping, again: I wanted the

racer who finished first based on corrected time, to be shown first. In handicapping sailboats, the guy who finishes the race first is not always the one who gets first place, therefore; I had the program present the results based on "Corrected Time" in ascending order. This way, the guy who's handicapped or corrected time showed him to be first was displayed on the first line of the report, second guy - second line, etc. The information could also have been presented in descending order or in the order according to the original index in the file. When all of this is complete, one has the choice to Print the file to a printer, a disk, or another file. Through the desk-top one can choose how many columns to be printed - 80, 96, or 132; or anything between and up to 232 columns can be printed.

Other features of the program are that one can choose how numbers are to be displayed. Either with a decimal place or not, the number of digits to the left and right of the decimal, whether a negative number can be displayed or not and from another set of choices what currency symbol is desired; whether it be the familiar dollar sign, Pound Sterling Sign (which is the default, by the way) or, for example, the Yen sign. When the choice is made, the program comes up in subsequent sessions the same way, so these choices do not have to be made at each session.

I have found this program to be more program than I need at this time.

In time however, I may find ways to use it that will utilize more of its vast functions. Perhaps when I get to that level, I will again write a continuing portion of this review which will include the advanced functions into which I have not yet delved. One minor complaint I have about Superbase - Personal is that there are a number of "RESERVED WORDS" - ones which can't be used as the titles to fields. In my race handicapping, I wanted to call one field "DAYS". Superbase would not let me use that name, although, it does not appear on the list of reserved words. In its place, I used the French "jours". No offense to the Brits who wrote the program, here. Another non-usable word is "ADDRESS". "ADD" does appear in the list of reserved words. To get around that, one can use "HOMEADD" or "OFFADD" for home address and office address, respectively. Among the many other reserved words are "FIRST" and "LAST", "NUMBER", "HOME", "ON" and "OFF".

The manual is quite good and there are a number of files supplied on the program disk to assist one in becoming familiar with all of the functions of the program through the Tutorial in the manual. In addition to that, there is a domestic support group which can be contacted for additional help, who are in Denver, Colorado and whose phone number is printed in the manual. I have called and they are quite helpful. At the recommended price of \$149.95 Superbase Personal is not cheap, however; I feel that it is well worth the money paid and will be quite useful

in years to come.

Bill Maddrey
Western Liason - S.T.A.T.U.S.

Evaluation Report:

ATARI 65XE Game Machine
Buck Maddrey

The 65XE Game Machine is a 64K computer game system. It has the full potential and capabilities of the standard 65XE computer or the 130XE but without the additional memory of the 130, which has 128K.

The system includes two game cartridges, Flight Simulator and Bug Hunt, and built in Basic Language and Missile Command, another game. These software packages add approximately \$60.00 value to the game machine. It will allow the use of previously released game cartridges for the computer systems. The system also includes the new Light Gun and a joystick. The light gun worked best at a distance of about 6 feet. With the addition of disk or tape drives, a word processing program, and printer, this "game machine" has the ability to become a complete computer system.

The Game Machine will hook up to a TV set or a monitor with the included cables. Sound and graphics are super! An additional RCA type cable is needed to hook up sound to a monitor.

I have personally tested the 65XE GM by attaching 3 disk drives, a printer interface, a printer, and used the popular Print Shop program to produce a calendar as well as a letterhead. I am very impressed with the performance of the 65XE Game Machine !

I feel that the 65XE GM would make the perfect 'entrance to computers' for new owners. It would enable families with young children to remove the keyboard from the system, by just unplugging it, and put it out of harms way. Later, the keyboard could be attached again so that Mom or Dad could write that thank you letter to Aunt Sarah, or dabble in Basic programming. This entrance to computing can help evaluate your or your child's interest in using the computer for a much much wider scope of uses.

PUZZLE

From your editor

In our last issue, I included a short 'unusual' paragraph. It was unusual due to the fact that though it contained almost 100 words, not a single word had the letter "E" in it.

Several members solved the mystery of this unusual paragraph. Honorable mention goes to Gene Rodriguez and his wife Fran for their solution. Theirs was the earliest 'postmark' coming in at 10:30 PM the same night. Don Soward

and Jimbo Blain also submitted correct answers at 8:30 AM and 12:00, respectively, the next day. Thanks to all who participated.

This month we have a word search puzzle submitted by Joe Hootman.

EMULATORXEQEA NOITULOSERTP
LGLEEVGWXRBRMIJDGSBSZMGRM
EECNANIMULRTHQO IDJUZOIVAA
LNPBEYTI RAPUXAYSECAUMGDPE
LPAXLKAFYCHLOTSKNHSDTWSFC
ATLAI IOSFPPXZATESEOZBPNBA
ROETRLTPJUIRFRITISCTTRAMF
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